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ABSTRACT

Because the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) recognizes the importance of international students to Canada and its institutions of higher education, it makes some recommendations to enhance policy related to international students and to facilitate the recruitment of international students to Canadian educational institutions. The AUCC recommends that the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act place a stronger emphasis on facilitating the recruitment of international students. It also recommends that should an in-Canada landing class for international students be created, a clear distinction be drawn between the student authorization process and the process of becoming a landed immigrant. The AUCC recommends that international students be allowed to work part-time off-campus during the school term and over holidays, and that visitors to Canada be allowed to change their visa status from visitor to international student from within Canada's borders. The AUCC recommends that the medical processing of international students be expedited as is currently being done on a pilot basis for Latin American and some other immigrants. The AUCC also recommends the development of a system of student visas differentiated by education subsector. (SLD)

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Recognizing the Importance of International Students to Canada in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act

A brief submitted to the House of Commons
Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration Canada
regarding Bill C-11, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and its Regulations

by the
Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC)

March 2, 2001

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Recognizing the Importance of International Students to Canada in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act

Further to the deliberations of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration Canada (SCCIC) on Bill C-11, the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) would like to address the issue of international students.

AUCC is interested in this issue for three main reasons:

- Canadian universities are increasingly looking to internationalize their campuses and international students play an important role in this regard both in terms of bringing an international perspective and more diversity to the classroom.

- There are significant economic benefits from international students. For the universities, they provide additional revenue which supports the academic endeavour. For local communities, expenditures by international students on housing, food, books etc. provide multiple economic spin-offs. For example, it is estimated that in 1996, international students contributed $2.7 billion to the Canadian economy, or the equivalent of 21,000 jobs (DFAIT 1998). More recently, a report commissioned by the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and Training on the economic impact of international education in B.C. estimated that the economic benefits of international students in all education sectors was approximately $443 million. Finally, in terms of Canada's longer-term interests, international students return to their home countries and become the future trading partners and decision-makers with an affinity for Canada.

- Canada is falling behind when it comes to international student recruitment. Other countries are benefitting from a coherent international student recruitment strategy, investment in promotion and competitive approaches to immigration policies and practices. In this latter area, we believe that Canada can improve its approach in order to better reflect the importance of recruiting international students and to level the playing field for Canadian universities which are facing stiff competition in attracting the best and brightest international students to their campuses.

With respect to our particular recommendations regarding the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* and its regulations, which we understand the Committee will also be considering, we would like to draw to your attention to the findings of recent research conducted by AUCC comparing the immigration policies and practices affecting international students in Canada and a number of competitor countries (executive summary attached).[1] This research points to several ways in which CIC can improve both its general approach to international students and the processing of student authorizations.

Immigration and Refugee Protection Act

Our research shows that Canada's main international competitors -- the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and France -- have an overall government-wide approach to international student recruitment and, consequently, that the importance of this goal is reflected in the policies of their respective immigration departments. In addition, former U.S. President Bill Clinton issued an executive memorandum in April 2000 in support of a strategy to attract more international students to the U.S. which includes reviewing student visa policies, procedures and regulations to remove barriers to student flows into the country. By contrast, Canada is the only country we studied not to have adopted a government-wide approach to international education or international student recruitment. In our review of the Act, we do not see much prominence given to the importance of international students to Canada nor to the goal of facilitating the recruitment of international students to Canadian educational institutions.

- **AUCC recommends that the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act place a stronger emphasis on facilitating international student recruitment as a major objective for Citizenship and Immigration Canada.**

Regulations to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act

While we understand that the regulations to the Act are in development, we note from CIC backgrounders that one new regulation being proposed by CIC concerns allowing international students to apply for permanent residence status from within Canada in order to increase the number of skilled workers coming here.

We have some concern about this proposed change to regulations if there is not a clear divide drawn between the student authorization process and the process of becoming a landed immigrant in Canada.

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[1] This research was conducted in partnership with the Canadian Education Centre (CEC) Network. A copy of the full study is available from AUCC upon request.

According to CIC's background notes to the Act, the department is proposing to make this provision available to "recently graduated foreign students who meet the criteria for economic immigration, have a permanent job offer and have been working in Canada". We find this wording encouraging but continue to be concerned that if "dual intent" is allowed, i.e., planning to temporarily study in Canada in the short-term but also considering staying in Canada in the long-term, then CIC immigration officials based in Canada's missions abroad will feel compelled to assess students both according to criteria for student authorization *and* as potential immigrants. This will, in our view, have the effect of slowing down the student authorization process, an area where our research shows that Canada already has the slowest student visa processing times among its competitors.

One possible approach for striking a balance between keeping the student authorization process as simple as possible and better tapping into this potential immigrant pool is to follow the Australian example. In Australia, international students are allowed to apply for permanent residence status *following the completion of study* and receive additional "points" toward their application because they have graduated from an Australian educational institution. Indeed, the allocation of additional points has proven to be very successful in attracting recently graduated international students; our research shows that 50% of new immigrants to Australia in 1999 in the independent immigrant category were former students.

- **AUCC recommends that should an in-Canada landing class for international students be created, that a clear distinction be drawn between the student authorization process and the process of becoming a landed immigrant.**

In addition, our comparative research points to several places where Canada is falling behind and, consequently, identifies a number of areas where CIC could implement new measures as part of the development of new supporting regulations to the Act:

i) Canada is the only country that does not allow international students to pursue part-time off-campus employment opportunities during the term or holidays. All of our key international competitors allow international students to work part-time (usually 15 to 20 hours per week under varying conditions) both on *and* off-campus, recognizing that this is an area of relative importance when international students are making their decisions about destinations for study abroad.

- **AUCC recommends that CIC allow international students to work part-time off-campus during the school-term and over the holidays.**

ii) With the exception of France, Canada is the only country not to allow people on a visitor visa (which includes ESL and FSL students) to change their status to that of international student from within its borders. It is recognized by most of our competitors that tourists may become interested in pursuing studies while visiting a host country, or that if visitors are in the country for short-term language study, they represent a potential pool of international students for postsecondary institutions. They therefore facilitate as much as possible the decision of these visitors to become international students by eliminating the cumbersome process of requiring them to leave the host country to receive their student visa.

- **AUCC recommends that CIC allows visitors to Canada to apply to change their visa status from visitor to international student from within Canada's borders.**

iii) Australia and New Zealand share Canada's concerns about health risks from tuberculosis and other diseases and, consequently, have relatively stringent health assessment requirements in place. However, standard procedure in these countries for processing medical exams is quite streamlined. In Australia's case, medical exam results are reviewed directly by immigration officers in the local missions. Only negative medical results are sent back to Sydney or to Australian regional missions for review, a process which could add several weeks to student visa processing.

In Canada, this streamlined procedure for medical exam processing is the exception rather than the rule and, as it stands now, our research shows that we have the longest overall student visa processing times among our competitor countries. However, Canada has introduced a pilot project in certain countries in the Asia-Pacific and Latin America which is similar to Australia's approach. This pilot has been very successful, reducing processing times significantly; it has been permanently implemented in the four initial countries and may become permanent in Latin America.

- **AUCC recommends that CIC's expedited medical pilot project become standard procedure in Latin America and be piloted at other Canadian missions in student recruitment target markets with a view to making it standard procedure at all Canadian missions.**

iv) Last but not least, one of the key challenges faced by all countries is finding a balance between facilitating the entry of genuine international students and maintaining the integrity of the immigration system. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence (and some data) to suggest that there are fewer concerns with respect to risks for fraud, visa non-compliance and non-return to home countries when it comes to university-level students. Some of our competitors, e.g., Australia, have changed their approach to recognize this differentiation. For example, Australia is moving away from its single student visa regime

to introduce a system of student visa sub-classes: tertiary, vocational, secondary, and ESL. These new sub-classes will be assessed according to a set of risk factors for each target market and each education sub-sector. We think that a similar approach in Canada to risk assessment and streamlined processing would significantly improve processing times and decrease the risk that the applications from genuine students are refused.

- **AUCC recommends that CIC modify its current single student visa class to develop and implement a system of student visas differentiated by education sub-sector**

In conclusion, we would like to reiterate how important international students are to Canada. In general, international education is a strong priority for AUCC member institutions and international student recruitment is seen as an integral part of this. The federal government needs to take a strategic approach to international education and international student recruitment. As part of this government-wide approach, one key priority needs to be increasing resources for CIC's processing of international students and changing the way in which CIC sets policies and practices, in order to help Canada be a player in the international education market.